Approaching religious symbols in the public space. Contemporary art and museums as places of negotiation?

Pezzoli-Olgiati, Daria

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Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati

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Contemporary Art and Museums as Places of Negotiation?

ABSTRACT

This essay responds to Sigrid Schade's contribution by outlining the multilayered meaning-making processes deployed by the use of religious symbolism in visual culture. Referring in a concise way to a selected example of contemporary art, it drafts possible methodological approaches to a challenging field of research.

KEYWORDS

religious symbols, public space, arts, museum, tradition, visual culture

BIOGRAPHY

Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati is a professor of the Study of Religion at the University of Zurich and director of the interdisciplinary Centre for Religion, Economy and Politics (ZRWP). In 1996, she received her PhD and in 2002, she completed her Habilitation in the Study of Religion at the University of Zürich. Since 2004 she has held a Swiss National Science Foundation Professorship. In the same year, she founded the reseach group 'Media and Religion' (www.religionswissenschaft.uzh.ch/medien). Her main teaching and research interest focuses on theories and methods of the study of religion, space and gender theories in the study of religion, the interaction between religion, visual communication and media, the role of religion in the public space and religious traditions in the European history of religions and in the contemporary world. Her latest publications include *Religion in Cultural Imaginary. Exploration in Visual and Material Practices,* 2015, and *Religious Representation in Place. Exploring Meaningful Spaces at the Intersection of the Humanities and Sciences,* 2014, coedited with Mark K. George.

Depending on the period and culture as well as on the socio-political context, the relationship between visual representation and religion has been articulated in a broad range of fashions. From the paradigm of art as a religious practice to a radical criticism of religion by visual means (Vera Frenkel's THIS IS YOUR MESSIAH SPEAKING, dis-

cussed by Sigrid Schade, is a good example in this context),[1] the history of religion and contemporary society offer many cases of this multifaceted interdependency. Today, questions about the role, the significance, the challenges, and the problems of visual representations of religion(s) in the public space are strongly interlaced with the presence and interaction of divergent religions and world views (including agnosticism and atheism) within democracies.[2] Furthermore, religious symbolism from very different religious traditions across cultures and times recurs in many places, not only within religious institutions. Explicit visual references to religion can be found in different social spheres and are used in manifold ways: in commercials and advertising, in fashion, in different domains of popular culture (from songs to cartoons), in mainstream movies and art house films and in contemporary arts. The various references to religious symbols, narratives, and practices are presented following religious conventions and iconographies quite faithfully, which allows for immediate identification, although very often the religious references are extrapolated from the original context, reinterpreted and alienated from religious practice.[3]

To grasp the manifold recurrence of religious symbols in visual culture, several approaches can be illuminating: for instance, secularisation, desecularisation and mediatisation theories elucidate some aspects of this intricate field. The basic concepts of the various secularisation theories help to describe and conceptualise the use of religious symbols outside the (fluid) boundaries of religious institutions as an interaction between different social spheres.[4] With the assumption of a desecularisation approach, it is possible to focus on the growing occurrence of religious symbols in the public sphere as a consequence of the increasing significance of religious institutions and practices of groups and individuals. In this approach, religion is generally associated with migration, social change and conflicts.[5] Consequently, visual representation that aims to emphasise the increasing presence of religion focuses on visible markers of belonging to particular religious communities. Moreover, the debate about mediatisation draws attention to the dominant role of (visual) media in the circulation of religion. Media do not just "transport" religious symbols, they also shape and reshape them, creating new forms of religious representations and practices that can be initiated by traditional religious organisations and/or by individuals or other social agencies.[6]

1 See Schade 2015.

2 See as an example Beinhauer-Köhler/Roth/Schwarz-Boenneke 2015. See also Baumann/Tunger-Zanetti 2011, 151–188.

3 Cf. Pezzoli-Olgiati 2015 (with several case studies by different authors).

4 See Bhargava 2011, 92–113; Calhoun 2011, 75–91; Mendieta/VanAntwerpen 2011, 1–14.

5 See, as an example for a very influential position, Casanova 1994. Cf. also Ziebertz 2011, 1–17.

6 See Lövheim 2015 and Hjarvard 2011, 119–135; Herbert 2011, 626–648; Hoover 2011, 610–625; Meyer/Moors 2006, 1–25. R. Ruard Ganzevoort introduces the concept of deinstitutionalisation of religion to describe the use of religion in media and popular culture: Ganzevoort 2011, 95–119.

It is not surprising that different theoretical paradigms can be combined to explore the quite complex relationship between the visibility of religion in contemporary public spheres that encompasses spaces (in a physical, social and symbolic sense, like cities, common urban ground, places of worship, museums, and temporary installations), public political debates and the broad range of media that characterise the contemporary world. But even when different approaches and theoretical horizons are combined, some aspects remain diffuse.

Drawing on this debate, I would like to highlight the following methodological questions: First, what is "religion" in this context? Second, how can the meaning-making processes generated by references to religion by visual means be understood from an academic, descriptive perspective? More or less consciously, religion is used in different ways and with various connotations. Religion recurs as a general category in common language for indicating private practices, an issue with a political agenda. It can be an official denomination of a group or used in emic perspective to describe personal belief. And, of course, it is also a scientific term discussed in innumerable academic streams and schools. Secularisation and desecularisation theorists are mainly interested in the relationship between religious institutions and their increasing or decreasing influence in society, while the mediatisation approach conceives religion more as a set of symbols and practices that may be associated with religious institutions but can be also independent and free from structured religious organisation. Therefore, although all deal with "religion", they focus on distinct aspects. In this already quite intricate field, broadening the perspective by including visual communication poses further challenges. Images do not generally contain the term "religion"; they operate with visual signs that refer in some ways to religious communities, traditions, knowledge or imaginary. Visual communication has its own logic and needs specific approaches. Meaning-making processes are dynamic and in the tension between production and reception different, even contrasting significances can arise. Therefore, religious images are understood as dynamic processes that encompass production, representation and multi-layered, sometimes contrasting reception processes.[7]

In this essay, I delineate possible methodological approaches to the significance of visual religious references within the public sphere by considering the specific case of contemporary art and museums.[8] As an example we consider *Proposition de détour* by Su-Mei Tse from 2008 (fig. 1), which offers a good case study for the interaction of art, museum and religious symbols.

In a first step, the work of art is considered as an independent *representation* that is consistent with itself. It is an industrially printed wool carpet with a diameter of 900 cm and reproduces, in reduced size, the eight central rows of the famous 13th century labyrinth in Chartres cathedral. The reference to that labyrinth is given by the shape

7 See Pezzoli-Olgiati 2015, 251–276.

8 On the relationship between religion and museum see the special issue of Religion in Europe 2011; Bräunlein 2004; Buggeln 2012; Carol 2007.

Fig.1: Su-Mei Tse, *Proposition de détour*, 2008, printed wool carpet, diameter 900 cm, here in a exhibition in the Museum of Art Lucerne, Switzerland in 2010 © Kunstmuseum Lucerne, photograph: Andri Stadler.

the industrial carpet is cut into. The quotation of the Chartres labyrinth is explicit and, accordingly, so is the reference to (medieval) Christianity. Labyrinths, found in Christian churches since the 4th century, were associated with the image of the world as a place of sin and of purification as well as a path to salvation.[9] The Chartres labyrinth has been reproduced in many parts of the world. In this sense, *Proposition de détour* reiterates a Christian symbol within an already existing tradition of reproduction of this obligatory path. The design, in contrast, depicts an oriental paradise garden taken from a Persian carpet of the early 16th century (Safavid Period, ca. 1520–1530).[10] The religious reference is to Islam. This work merges symbols from different religious traditions, a Christian labyrinth and an Islamic paradise, combining the oriental carpet tradition with the act of walking a labyrinth in a cathedral. A common thread that reinforces this unique link may be given by references to salvation ideas and concepts of life after death in both the labyrinth of Chartres and the textile representation of a Persian paradise. Through this playful connection, the references to the religious symbol systems in the work of art are materialised, on the one hand, on the level of representation and, on the other hand, on the level of performance: the original use of the labyrinth is in effect reiterated in the white cube atmosphere of the art mu-

9 Cf. Kern 1999, 207–227.
10 Fischer 2010, 112–113.

seum. From the perspective of *production* it is relevant to consider the multicultural background of the artist, born in 1973 and living today in Paris and Luxembourg. Seen in the context of her whole work, *Proposition de détour* translates cultural differences and stereotypes into a visual-spatial dimension and challenges them, asking the question "what might be a universal language?"[11] This challenging question is handed over to the audience.

Here, we consider the perspective of *reception* in the particular case of an exhibition in 2010 at which *Proposition de détour* was displayed.[12] The visitors to the museum were invited to walk on this labyrinth-carpet and to perform what used to be a religious practice that, within the museum space, is estranged from its original context. Depending on their cultural knowledge and religious orientation, different visitors may have approached this work – which has been displayed in many countries – in various ways. The very use of such a general shape as a labyrinth opens possible references to other religious practices and ideological orientations as well. One person may walk on the labyrinth-carpet associating it with a Christian pilgrimage, while another will take the walking in the museum as a playful way to interact with this work of art of an internationally established artist. People who are familiar with Persian rugs or Islamic concepts of paradise will put this aspect in the foreground. In any case, the contrasts merged in this work of art can hardly be ignored, for instance the formally harmonic fusion of Christian and Islamic symbolism, or the suggested association between the cold stone of a cathedral floor and the experience of a soft, warm wool carpet, or the habit of viewing works of art in museums from a secure distance and the invitation to touch with one's own feet a precious contemporary artefact. The reception process, in this case, stresses the bodily dimension of experiencing a work of art. The suggested reception of the merged religious symbols is realised in the ideal case by means of a visual-spatial performance.

Depending on the factual reception process in which visitors are engaged, Su-Mai Tse's *Proposition de détour* may act as a religious and/or an artistic response to contemporary, often conflicting diversities of beliefs and orientations. By merging differences, the work of art challenges the audience and engages it in an active interpretation process.

The engagement of this kind of interacting with religious references in contemporary arts and museums through a communicative approach highlights new dimensions of dealing with religion in the public space. Selected symbols, narratives or practices are extrapolated from communities and traditions and put on stage in new media and public places. This alienation does not transform the meaning-making processes in a unique direction but invites the audience to take an active role as interpreter; when

11 Cf. http://peterblumgallery.com/exhibitions/su-mei-tse-proposition-de-d-tour/press_release [accessed 14 May 2015].

12 Signs of life, Museum of Art Lucerne: http://www.kunstmuseumluzern.ch/ausstellungen/lebenszeichen-altes-wissen-in-der-zeitgenossischen-kunst [accessed 14 May 2015].

religion is exhibited, complex communication processes take place. Therefore, religion can be seen, for instance, as a valuable part of a common national heritage or as part of a basic artistic means of expression.

In the context of the art museum, the significance of religious symbolism is negotiated and open to manifold interpretations in which various actors – producers, works of art and receivers – are involved. Within these communication processes, references to religion may assume an existential significance for individuals and groups, or be read as cultural or political statements, as elements of personal belief, as common practice, or as a matter of cultural identity.

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